PART - II

TECHNO SOCIETY

Virtual Gaming: Child's Play or A Serious Concern

Kasturi Ghosh is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Salesian College, Siliguri Campus. She holds an MPhil (Dissertation: Practicing Religion via Performing Art) and an MA degree in the subject from Jadavpur University, Kolkata. She regularly contributes articles to local magazines like Uttormegh, published by the Greater Siliguri Publishers and Book Sellers Association, and Purobarta, published by Siliguri Municipal Corporation. Her areas of interest include literature, religion and art, discourses and cultural studies.

Abstract

Virtual Gaming industry is a growing multi-billion dollar business at present. What they create and market in the form of video games are engaging to both children and adults as they simulate real life as well as conjure up fantastic and imaginary worlds. Therefore, it is not surprising that they are in high demand and are sold at a high price. Though we generally dismiss video games as childish pastimes and harmless engagements, recent developments around the world like gaming related crimes, sicknesses and deaths reported frequently in South Korea as well as other nations have shaken us out of our indifference and compelled us to take them seriously. Many of these games feature violence as their prime action, rewarding the gamer with in-game perks and powers as one progresses with its ruthless killing spree. These games are generally based on military strategies and tactics, science fiction and more popularly ancient myths and legends. Just like our art and literature, these games too stand as cultural texts of our time. Within the scope of this paper I would like to focus on two games, namely *God of War* and *Dante's Inferno* which draw upon classical mythology and literary text as their sources, twisting and manipulating them into new tales altogether. The two questions or serious concerns that I would like to bring up here are what kind of statement or commentary are these new myths making about our society and whether from those statements can we establish any real difference, from the myths of the old, or progress made by us?

Keywords: Virtual Gaming, Mythmaking, Power, Hegemony, Socio Conditioning.

Technology and society are interdependent and inseparable. From the dawn of civilization human beings have invented tools and discovered methods to make life easy. We cannot fail to recall (from text book experiences) how discovery of fire was a giant step in the path of civilization, or how the invention of the wheel revolutionised primitive society. We have come a long way from such times and are now surrounded by hundreds and thousands of different sophisticated tools at any given moment without which we cannot imagine life. Like fire and the wheel, any technological advancement is at first required, conceived and achieved for the benefit of the society. But their use and purpose are invariably perverted once they come into being. Electronic media, a major component of technological development, is instrumental in dissemination of information; and entertainment, communication and education are increasingly depending on it as well.

More and more number of people are getting initiated into its use as the world is speedily becoming electronic, therefore, its responsibilities towards the society are also increasing. One important technological development in the arena of electronic media of the latter half of the last century is the Video Game. Its advent goes hand in hand with the development of computer technology and its popularization. Today gaming industry is a huge and growing sector, developing and marketing both games and gaming platforms. There are two major kinds of gaming platforms, one which is dedicated to games like the very sophisticated *Xbox360* from Microsoft and *Play Station* from Sony, with peripheral options of multimedia usage, and the integrated ones like computers and mobile phones which have games included in their bundle of applications. They cater to all ages, cultures and tastes, with a plethora of games providing simulated life-like experiences, stimulation, and adrenaline rush to their players.

Many researches show the benefits reaped by experimental usage of video games in education, in combating gaps existing in the conventional form of education created by diverse individual specific needs.[1] Other reports and surveys show how unsupervised and free use of these very games can be detrimental to the gamers.[2] South Korea has been in the news for frequent reports of video game abuse where internet gaming led to suicides, sicknesses and death, psychological disorders, neglect of responsibilities, truancy, and cyber crimes. They are highly addictive, which start as ways of relaxation and entertainment at the outset, soon becoming a serious involvement on the part of the gamer, taking him away from his real life, making him neglect his real responsibilities, avoiding real people and adding more pressure on him by the in-game demands increasing with game-life progress. While excessive playing which involves staring at the electronic screen for a long time has its own negative effects like sleeplessness, increased irritability and even blindness.[3] The physical posture in which one plays these games,[4] crouched up for hour in a closed room, not going out into the light or playing real sports affect one adversely. Conversely, many claim to gain unique life and literary experiences which satisfy and enrich them intellectually through these games, over and above using these games for venting their frustrations, giving in to their basic instincts of chasing and hitting targets, and using them as diversions from their daily woes and cares.[5]

1 Mark Griffiths, "The Educational Benefits of Videogames" in *Education and Health*, 20 (2002)3, 47-51.

2 Carolyn Sun, "South Korea is the most-wired country in the world-and online games are the new drug of choice for its youth", The Daily Best, October 16, 2011. URL: http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2011/10/16/southkorea-s-video-game-addiction.html (accessed on 11/Apr/2013).
Geoffrey Cain, "South Korea Cracks Down on Gaming Addiction", Time, April 20, 2012.
URL: http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1983234,00.html

3 Molly Webster, "Sitting too Close to the Computer Screen Can Make You Go Blind", Scientific American, URL: http://www.scientificamerican.com/ article.cfm?id=is-sitting-too-close-to-screen-making-you-blind (accessed on 11/Apr/2013).

4 Henceforth the word "games" will be used synonymously with "virtual games".

5 "Do Violent Video Games Contribute to Youth Violence?", ProCon.org, URL: http://videogames.procon.org/ (accessed on 4/Apr/2013).

In an article titled "Videogames as Literary Experiences,"[6] in the online magazine *Specter*, the author Joseph Michael Owens talks about how playing games gave him literary experiences that he was unable to achieve from reading regular books. He compares games like Chrono Trigger, [7] a game with as many as eleven different endings to a genre of "Choose Your Own Adventure" books published by Bantam from 1979 to 1998 like *The Cave of Time* and *Deadwood City*, which Owens describes as ostensibly second person "game-books" designed with the intention of putting the reader in the middle of the story, the reader could die along the way and had to restart the adventure, making sure to choose a wiser path upon his next read-through. Owen also adds

> While definitely geared toward a younger audience, the books demanded the reader use his or her critical-thinking and problem solving-skills while reading, and, more importantly, to understand that a story doesn't necessarily have to unfold linearly. The reader also felt he or she had more to gain or to lose, given their own personal investment in the story-because if "you" die, you'll never know what would have happened next!

What these books and games with multiple endings do is that they gave choices to their reader/players and then they make their readers/ players feel responsible about the choices that they made by providing different subsequent consequences for each different choice that they have made. Hence there existed a freedom of choice of following your own desired path or storyline in these products.

Art also exists for providing experiences to its audience. As pointed out by Aristotle, more than two thousand years ago, art is capable of providing us with experiences that we might not be able to have in our short lives limited by space, cultural, geographical and other independent factors upon which we do not exercise any control. This attracts us towards art, making us read a book to know the story of another; or read a story or a feeling in a painting or a piece of music, or experience the play of incidents and events in a drama or film. There texts or works not only provide us with experiences that we may not have had in our real lives, but also narrate what we can relate to from previously had similar experiences. They are both commentaries on ourselves and our society and also the tools to build up the desired society or person in us. Books and games mentioned by Owens are rare, most books or games available in the market do not have alternative story lines leading to alternative endings and are more restricted in the choice that they provide to their audience. In two other serial and companion articles, the same author brings up the concept of *Culture Industry*[8] coined by the critical

---

6 Joseph Michael Owens, "Videogames as Literary Experiences", Specter Magazine, September, 2011. URL: http://www.spectermagazine.com/collective/videogames/

7 *Chrono Compendium*, URL: http://www.chronocompendium.com/ (accessed on11/Apr/2013).

8 Culture industry: Adorno argues that the culture industry involves a change in the commodity character of art, such that art's commodity character is deliberately acknowledged and art abjures its autonomy. With its emphasis on marketability, the culture industry dispenses entirely with the 'purposelessness' that was central to art's autonomy. Marketability becomes a total demand, the internal economic structure of cultural commodities shifts. Instead of promising freedom from societally dictated uses, and thereby having a genuine use value that

theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, presented as critical vocabulary in the chapter "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception", of their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* first published in the year 1944. In these two articles named "Creating Art Within the Culture Industry: Part 1"[9] and 'The Culture Industry part 2: Complacency's Death Knell",[10] he discusses contemporary commodities that make up and promote the culture industry, mostly conforming with Adorno and Horkheimer's views quoting huge chunks of their critical observations from their above mentioned essay. The two philosophers established how culture is also contrived by the capitalists to create demand for their products and to make the masses believe that their happiness is dependent on their capability to own these products; and the choices that they think they make freely are arbitrary in nature, guided by the culture.

The two cultural texts that I am going to analyze in this light are *God of War* and *Dante's Inferno* that I have had firsthand experience of playing (on the Play Station and I cannot deny enjoying them thoroughly), both of which are action adventure games, supposedly based on vengeance. As their names suggest, they are loosely based on classical mythology and the first of Dante Alighieri's three-part epic Divine Comedy composed in early 14th century. I say loosely because they are manipulated and distorted accounts of the original versions, changed beyond recognition. What is important here is whether the commentaries made by the original versions on their culture and society are majorly different or are very similar to the commentaries made by two games on our age and times.

Classical mythology originated in the ritual practices and cults of the Greco-roman people which were orally transmitted for centuries before they were put down in paper; and that too was not done in the way we have these mythologies available to us today under one title like "Encyclopedia of Classical Mythology", or "Greek Mythology", etc. They were used in the works of ancient poets and playwrights like Aesop, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripedes, Apollonius, Hesiod, Homer and Pindar, before the birth of Christ, and were popular subjects of sculptures and paintings. They recorded the

---

people can enjoy, products mediated by the culture industry have their use value replaced by exchange value: Everything has value only in so far as it can be exchanged, not in so far as it is something in itself. For consumers the use value of art, its essence, is a fetish, and the fetish-the social valuation which they mistake for the merit of works of art- becomes its only use value, the only quality they enjoy. Hence the culture industry dissolves the 'genuine commodity character' that artworks once possessed when exchange value still presupposed use value. Lacking a background in Marxist theory, and desiring to secure legitimacy for 'mass art' or 'popular culture,' too many of Adorno's anglophone critics simply ignore the main point to his critique of the culture industry. His main point is that culture-industrial hyper-commercialization evidences a fateful shift in the structure of all commodities and therefore in the structure of capitalism itself. As explained from Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer' s book *Dialectic of Enlightenment, in Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Zuidervaart, Lambert, "Theodor W. Adorno", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.). URL = http://plato.stanford.edu/ archives/win2011/entries/adorno/ (accessed on 12/Apr/2013).

9 Joe Owens, "Creating Art within the Culture Industry", *Specter Magazine*, November, 2011. URL: : http://www. spectermagazine.com/collective/cultureindustry/(accessed on 12/Apr/2013).

10 Owens, "The Culture Industry Part 2|Complacency's Death Knell", *Specter Magazine*, December, 2011. URL: http://www.spectermagazine.com/collective/the-culture-industry-part-2-complacencys-death-knell/ (accessed on 12/Apr/2013).

traditions, beliefs, politics, social orders and norms followed by their people, and also set as examples to be followed by present and posterity. Plato in his *Republic* judged these works and gave us his verdict upon them. He was of the opinion that only those works should be permitted that comprise qualities and elements might go into making good soldiers and citizens of the city states or *Polis* of his time. No weakness should be allowed in the protagonists or heroes of such artistic exercises. He also condemned art as a useless and even a negative engagement that does not tell the truth but only imitates the real, stating that it take able bodied men away from serving their country by becoming soldiers and make them indulge their weaknesses and instincts through unrestrained expression of their passions and their emotions through it.

Plato therefore advocated the suppression of individuality for the benefit and smooth running of the state. The individual was a mere puppet or pawn to serve the greater power of the state machinery. The power was wielded by the Olympian Gods in the myths, who played with the humans as they pleased, tricking them to serve their needs, torturing them as per their whim and demanding allegiance and veneration from them, failing to do which they would earn the displeasure, wrath and punishment from these gods. Hercules, a bastard son of Zeus the king of gods, half god and half man, was the embodiment of everyman in Greek mythology that had the potential of one and the limitation of the other. Hercules earned the jealousy and wrath of Zeus's wife Hera who drove him mad and made him kill his wife and two sons. And then his mortal king Eurystheus threw no less than twelve trials his way (actually ten, but tricked him into doing twelve) to stop him from achieving redemption and godhood, and joining the rest of gods in Olympus, he had to play by the rules and whims of those in power and prove his worth (not to them, as they knew and feared it, and thus prevented him from realizing it, but to himself).

The hero of *God of War (GoW)* is not Ares, the original Greek god of war, but a new character called Kratos, another bastard son of Zeus and a contender to his much coveted throne. He has an interesting meeting with Hercules in *GoW III* fighting and killing him; Like Hercules, Kratos is also a victim of the jealousies, insecurities, conspiracies and whims of the gods, Zeus takes away his younger brother Deimos in fear of being overthrown by him in future and causing an end to Olympus. Kratos once dies fighting in war, prays to the god of war and is reanimated by Ares; becoming a slave and soldier to Ares, who also tricks him into killing his wife and daughter. Henceforth, Kratos is haunted by his guilt kept fresh by dreams of his heinous crimes given to him by the gods to keep his spirit of vengeance alive and making him an easy pawn to be manipulated, played with and used in their unending tussels and conspiracies. In the course of the game, which has no less than seven installments for which as many as four different gaming consoles or platforms are required, he kills almost all the important and well known Greek gods, constantly serving the ends of Zeus and Athena, believing them and being tricked by them into doing all of the actions of the games. One who plays *GoW* once, whether finds it interesting and desires to play on or stop, will never deny the extreme good looks of the game,

it uses high definition graphics with lots of colours an details and very engaging and interesting gameplay, including puzzles and mini games with multiple weapons that can be unlocked and upgraded on the way, appealing to the senses and involving and immersing the gamer into itself.

One who is addicted to it is nothing more than Kratos, a slave to the higher powers and his own ignorance, who is playing, popularizing and promoting the life/ game life provided to him for a cost by the market, and enjoying doing it thoroughly. Not only do these individual games come for a high price, but the four different platforms, *Play Station 2* (for *GoW I* and *II*), *Play Station 3* (for *GoW III* and *GoW: Ascension*), *Play Station Portable* (for *GoW: Chains of Olympus* and *Ghost of Sparta*) and Java ME enabled mobile phones (for *GoW: Betrayal*) are all expensive devices themselves. Owning them is becoming a status symbol for junior and high school children even in third world countries like ours. Though GoW is marked with age rating 18+, I personally know several teens and preteens who have played and are in love with the game and look upto Kratos as their ideal. Souvik Mukherjee, from Presidency University, Kolkata, a gamer, author and professor of English gives us statistics of an online survey conducted by him which clearly indicates that the maximum number of gamers in our country are in the age group of 25 to 35, who are expected to be educated, well verse with technology and earning individuals, as indicated by their taking the online survey test and being able to afford these expensive gaming devices.[11] Therefore, how has civilization (from ancient Greece to twenty first century), technological advancement, spread of education, enlightenment, etc really changed us? The ancient Greeks believed in this 'Herculean Fate' and recreated it in their art and literature, we too are following suit, recreating it in films and games, the new mediums or cultural texts available to us and believing and living them through our virtual lives.

Dante's Inferno is no different. It is as graphic and visceral in conception and execution as GoW. In the game Dante is portrayed as a crusader in the third crusade, and Beatrice his betrothed, who gives into her desires for him before they are wedded and makes a pact with the Devil, staking her immortal soul, to bear the consequences of losing her chastity before getting married only if her lover and fiancé does not stay true to her when away fighting! Anyone with even a little knowledge of Dante's *Divine Comedy* can tell that this tale is hardly based on the original text to which it owes its name. In the game, inspite of his faith, Dante is guilty of committing numerous atrocities upon his enemies, both worriers and civilians, including giving into his lust for a prisoner woman and thus condemning his beloved Beatrice's soul to eternal damnation. He returns home to a dying Beatrice (killed by the avenging husband of the woman Dante slept with) whose soul is carried away by Satan to hell. Dante has a confrontation with an assassin and then visits a chapel and swears to bring back his beloved and follows her into hell.

11 Dr. Souvik Mukherjee, "Video Gamesin India: A Research Survey", *Ludus exMachina* (blog), March 7, 2013. URL: http://readinggamesandplayingbooks.blogspot.in/2013/03/videogamesin-india-research-survey.html (accessed on 13/Apr/2013).

Virgil leads him through the 'Nine Circles' of hell as Dante pursues the tortured and metamorphosed soul of Beatrice, breaking the chains of every circle and overcoming each evil represented by the different circles of hell and finally reaches and seemingly defeats Satan. Upon his success he witnesses Beatrice's soul leaving for heaven with an angel. But soon Satan informs him that he is already dead and cannot return to the world of the living, and that Beatrice was never meant to stay in hell; it was only an illusion caused by the Devil to trick Dante, a soldier of God, into entering hell and breaking the nine chains that imprisoned Satan there, in order to release him allowing him to move freely in the world of men to corrupt and ruin it. Here, apparently, Dante is a believer, a strong soldier, a red blooded man taking what he pleases, but also suffering from the pangs of conscience; going after the powerless damsel in distress, and trying to fight the evils in order to rescue her and be the hero. Instead he is tricked, first he is a soldier, who killed in the name of religion (what many did in the middle-ages unquestioningly, and are still doing), forgetting completely that faith stand for love and peace. Secondly, he is a self righteous fool; driven by illusions of staying true to love, while has every desire to give in to the demands of the flesh at the slightest opportunity. Thirdly, he is a self proclaimed hero: of war and of his society, a chivalrous chauvinistic protector of the honour and destiny of his women folk. But after completing the game we know that he too is tricked, into believing he is powerful and has the capability to choose and to change. He is nothing but a pawn in the hands of those in power.

In Dante Aleghieri's *Divine Comedy* Beatrice was his muse and his ideal, one who can be loved and admired from far but never achieved. She represented everything high and holy and was incapable of featuring in his hell/ inferno or purgatory owing to the shear purity of her essence, being present only in heaven, her rightful home. She was the one saving Dante with her moral strength and piety, and did not require his rescuing or aid. Dante was a student of philosophy and believed in the divine authority of the Papacy, at a time when his country was torn between political conflicts between the Papacy and the Monarchy over claims of superiority. He was a powerful thinker, solidly grounded in Aristotle, patristic theology, and thirteenth-century scholastic debate, bringing these resources directly to bear on educating his countrymen and inspiring them to pursue the happiness that rewards the philosopher.[12] His motives were therefore not apolitical. Beatrice de Folco Portinari, the real lady was never a part of his life; he had met her at the age of nine publicly and once later, and continued to love her after her marriage and his own to different individuals, and even after her death. She was the inspiration for his poems and his love for her was in the tradition of courtly love where noble ladies are admired from far by men of lesser standing in life, acting only as a muse to their lovers. The lady was attractive as long as she was not attainable, if she discarded her cool and cultivated distance from and indifference to the lover and gave into or reciprocated his feelings she lost her elevated position and

---

12 Edward N. Zalta (ed.), "Dante Alighieri" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,*Winter Edition, 2011. URL: http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/dante/ (accessed on 12/Apr/2013).

was not an object of admiration anymore. Such were the traditions and restrictions imposed by courtly love upon both parties, as informed by books of history and literatures of that period and after.

In the game *Dante's Inferno*, too, Beatrice is not really there, she is just an illusion created by the powerful Devil to compel Dante into doing his bidding. The position of the women in both the texts is similar, they have no real role to play but the role the society assigns to them and expects them to play; preserving their chastity until marriage, hence staying far away from lovers who are socially not at par to them and would not therefore make suitable husbands, noncompliance to these rules came with the threat of eternal damnation. Either the women is elevated and inflated to angelic proportions (Beatrice in *Divine Comedy*) or degenerated into a whore serving fallen beings (Beatrice in the game) in need of rescuing by a self righteous, delusional, puppet hero.

Both Kratos and Dante lack free will and autonomy; they are physically dead,[13] reanimated corpses doing the tasks assigned by the power that controls them. In the absence of freedom and choice human life is akin to death. The illusion of life is sustained by keeping the being busy and making him feel that he has freedom or is exercising his will. While in reality the character dies as soon as he fails to follow the set storyline, like when he is unable to jump a cliff successfully, or kill all the enemies promptly. There are no alternative paths provided in these stories, the player like the in-game character does not have any autonomy over his game-life. But he is not allowed to realize or dwell on it as challenges are thrown at him in quick succession, giving him choice of weapons and multiple techniques of assault, which more or less cause the same kind of damage, (just like Dante's Inferno can be played either *Xbox 360, PS3* and/ or *PSP*, allowing the player to choose to buy any of these devices, who all perform the same task). The gamers believe they are motivated by their own cause, but upon completing their long ordeals realize that they were only tricked into believing so.

Adorno and Horkheimer argued that in a capitalist society mass culture is akin to a factory producing standardized cultural goods - films, radio programmes, magazines, etc.[14]These homogenized cultural products are used to manipulate mass society into docility and passivity.[15] The introduction of the radio, a mass medium, no longer permits its listener any mechanism of reply, as was the case with the telephone. Instead,

13 Dante is dead and in hell and Kratos has been reanimated by Ares and renamed as the Ghost of Sparta.

14 "Culture today is infecting everything with sameness. Film, radio, and magazines form a system. Each branch of culture is unanimous within itself and all are unanimous together. Even the aesthetic manifestations of political opposites proclaim the same inflexible rhythm...All mass culture under monopoly is identical... Films and radio no longer need to present themselves as art. Thetruth that they are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the trash they intentionally produce. "Adorno, T. W., with Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002), 94.

15 "...The standardized forms, it is claimed, where originally derived from the needs of the consumers: that is why they are accepted with so little resistance. In reality, a cycle of manipulation and retroactive need is unifying the system ever more tightly." Ibid., 94- 95.

listeners are not subjects anymore but passive receptacles exposed "in authoritarian fashion to the same programs put out by different stations."[16] The demand exists for the reproduction of the same goods and to sustain that demand it is necessary to perpetuate sameness in the public alienated from its true self. It is easy for all to accept these products as they claim to originate from the 'need' of the people. The above philosophers also point out that the minds of the people are conditioned into believing in it as they are also part of the culture industry. Even if one decides to 'dissent', one has a set of rules that one can 'follow' to set one apart from the main stream, but these rules are provided by the society and not the individual. In nonconformity too, the individual is a part and not outside the culture that controls it. It is true that we cannot avoid culture and its mechanisms if we live in society, unless we find an unclaimed stretch of land far away from locality and settle there, hunting and gathering from nature, which we would immediately conclude as highly idealistic and inconvenient! But then how do we know what is real freedom if we have never had it? We cannot be certain, and cannot shut out the influences working on us unknowingly and incessantly. What we can do is question, it is our prerogative as educated, thinking and feeling human beings to question before accepting and following, not in order to be different or bring about a revolution, but to learn to judge for ourselves, taking responsibility for our decisions, bearing the consequences entailing it (chances are we will be forced to conform, or be misunderstood and marked as offensive, unsocial and even anti-social), and to approximate towards the illusive freedom.

Conversely, only if we question the electronic media (and other tools of the culture industry), will it know that it is to be responsible and answerable to us; after all we can influence it as much as be influenced by it, by our conscious, alert, educated, active and persistent participation in it. By not doing so we will allow the producers to manipulate our demands and to sell us their products and ideas by encoding them through art and technology, which are ideally only supposed to give us aesthetic pleasure and make life easier in order to have enough leisure to contemplate and experience the aesthetic pleasures. If we unquestioningly believe in and follow the set path and directives subtly concealed in every cultural text, our fate will never be any better than that of Hercules or Kratos or Dante, toy soldiers groomed to fight others' wars, fulfilling others' ends mere playthings in the hands that wield the power, using technology to enslave us the masses.

16 "The step from telephone to radio has clearly distinguished the roles. The former liberally permitted the participant to play the role of subject. The latter democratically makes everyone equally into listeners, in order to expose them in authoritarian fashion to the same programs put out by different stations. No mechanism of reply has been developed..." Ibid., 95-96.